



Human Trafficking in LGBTQ+ Youth

This publication outlines practical considerations for law enforcement and social services agencies working with youth who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ+) and are victims of human trafficking. As one of the most vulnerable populations for sex or labor trafficking, these youth are twice as likely as their peers to experience homelessness¹ and represent up to 40 percent of young people on the streets.² Research has found that the odds of LGBTQ+ youth becoming victims of sex trafficking are two times higher than for their heterosexual peers.³

LGBTQ+ youth leave or are forced from their home for many reasons—to escape poverty or abuse or, often, because their family, friends, and community do not accept their gender identity or sexuality. Without a stable home or family system, LGBTQ+ youth face prejudice, stigma, and homophobia, leading to housing insecurity,

1. University of Chicago, “LGBTQ Young Adults Experience Homelessness at More Than Twice the Rate of Their Peers,” press release, April 27, 2018, <https://news.uchicago.edu/story/lgbtq-young-adults-experience-homelessness-more-twice-rate-their-peers>.

2. Allie Gardner, “LGBTQ+ Youth and Human Trafficking,” United Way blog post, June 23, 2022, <https://www.unitedway.org/blog/lgbtq-youth-and-human-trafficking>.

3. Kimberly A. Hogan and Dominique Roe-Sepowitz (2020): LGBTQ+ Homeless Young Adults and Sex Trafficking Vulnerability, *Journal of Human Trafficking*, <https://doi.org/10.1080/23322705.2020.1841985>.

homelessness, food insecurity, and criminalization. Some find safe and stable placement in foster care, but age out of the system with no place to go.⁴

Human traffickers target unhoused youth—hanging out in bus depots, train stations, or shopping malls—and look for minors who seem lost, alone or otherwise vulnerable.⁵ The traffickers may offer food, clothing, or shelter and fill the void left by the youths' families. These perpetrators may pose as potential romantic partners or parental figures who fully accept the youths' sexual identity. Traffickers initially may shower these young people with attention and gifts, but after creating a family structure, they then manipulate, coerce, or force the youth into “earning their keep,” bringing in money for the “family,” or recruiting new members through sex or labor trafficking.⁶

Law enforcement may encounter these LGBTQ+ youth in the criminal justice system, being exploited in the sex industry, or forced to engage in illegal activities such as street crime and selling drugs. Keep in mind that force or fraud are not necessary to prove in cases involving minors. These criminal activities may make youth feel unsafe going to police for help. They may also be reluctant to reach out to social services

because many programs and institutions are not designed to address the unique needs of the LGBTQ+ population or minor victims of trafficking. Victims may suffer from trauma or guilt or may not even recognize that they are being trafficked.⁷

In *Breaking Barriers: Improving Services for LGBTQ+ Human Trafficking Victims*,⁸ The Polaris Project—a leader in the fight to eradicate human trafficking and better serve survivors in the LGBTQ+ community—offers 10 key steps to address institutional barriers or discrimination that LGBTQ+ youth encounter in the criminal justice and social service processes:

1. Building partnerships in the community that reflect the diversity of victims and survivors of human trafficking, including organizations with LGBTQ+ expertise to strengthen referral networks. These partners may include specialized LGBTQ+ providers, local gay-straight alliances, youth development organizations, universities and hospitals, sex worker rights groups, government or law enforcement LGBTQ+ liaisons, local branches of national LGBTQ+ organizations, runaway or homeless youth organizations, and survivor-led organizations.

4. National LGBTQIA+ Health Education Center, *LGBTQIA+ Youth Experiences of Human Trafficking: A Healing Approach* (Boston: The Fenway Institute, 2021), <https://www.lgbtqihealtheducation.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/09/Supporting-LGBTQIA-Youth-Who-Have-Experienced-Trafficking.pdf>.

5. The Polaris Project, *On-Ramps, Intersections, and Exit Routes: A Roadmap for Systems and Industries to Prevent and Disrupt Human Trafficking* (Washington, DC: The Polaris Project, 2018), <https://polarisproject.org/human-trafficking-and-the-transportation-industry/>.

6. The Polaris Project, “Love and Trafficking: How Traffickers Groom & Control Their Victims,” blog post, February 11, 2021, <https://polarisproject.org/blog/2021/02/love-and-trafficking-how-traffickers-groom-control-their-victims/>.

7. Gardner, “LGBTQ+ Youth” (see note 2).

8. The Polaris Project, *Breaking Barriers: Improving Services for LGBTQ+ Human Trafficking Victims* (Washington, DC: 2015), <https://polarisproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/breaking-barriers-lgbtq-services.pdf>.

2. Providing regular training and discussion forums for law enforcement and service providers on how to create a welcoming space for trafficking survivors by learning about LGBTQ+ youth experiences, survivor perspectives, empathetic responses, or recognition of any internal bias.
3. Improving the ability to identify human trafficking among LGBTQ+ youth by identifying destructive behaviors or involvement in uncharacteristic activities, like selling drugs or engaging in sex acts with strangers or adults, as symptoms of exploitation rather than criminality.
4. Revamping intake processes to be welcoming, inclusive, nondiscriminatory, and respectful, such as asking what a person would like to be called or what pronouns they use.
5. Revisiting practices on confidentiality, as LGBTQ+ youth may not feel comfortable disclosing their sexual identity to service providers or adults, may fear retribution from traffickers or judgement by providers or family members, or may be unaware about trafficking or assistance available to them. It is important to build rapport, demonstrate a consistent, nonjudgmental demeanor, and offer consistent support.
6. Adapting facilities to be inclusive by using LGBTQ+ staff or volunteers, providing LGBTQ+ materials on websites and in offices, and accommodating clients' sexual identity in housing, safety planning, restrooms, showering, and medical treatment.
7. Adjusting safety planning processes in shelters or juvenile detention facilities, as LGBTQ+ youth often run from care because of a lack of strong supports and resources. For example, survivors who identify as LGBTQ+ may face threats (from traffickers or their associates), family or intimate partner violence, or harassment and anonymous violence because of their sexual orientation or gender identification.
8. Allowing flexibility in treatment or care planning, which may require specialized services such as ongoing medical support for hormone treatments, clothing or hygiene products that fit the youth's gender identity, advocacy in changing their gender marker on their identification, or an understanding of employment rights.
9. Hosting regular LGBTQ+-inclusive events and activities to build awareness of and trust in services, demonstrate support for the LGBTQ+ community, build relationships, and increase cultural competencies.
10. Advocating for the rights of LGBTQ+ youth by identifying persistent gaps in programs and services, offering creative and practical solutions, and developing strong relationships with community stakeholders.

The following LGBTQ+ groups may assist law enforcement and social services organizations in better serving LGBTQ+ youth:

Campus Pride, <https://www.campuspride.org/>

GLSEN (formerly the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network),
<https://www.glsen.org/>

Human Rights Campaign, <https://www.hrc.org/>

Lambda Legal, <https://lambdalegal.org/>

National Alliance to End Homelessness, <https://endhomelessness.org/>

National Human Trafficking Resource Center, <https://humantraffickinghotline.org/>

National Network 4 Youth, <https://nn4youth.org/>

Northwest Network, <https://www.nwnetwork.org/>

The Palette Fund, <https://www.thepalettefund.org/>

PFLAG (formerly Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays),
<https://community.pflag.org/>

The Polaris Project, <https://www.polarisproject.org/>

The Trevor Project, <https://www.thetrevorproject.org/>

The Williams Institute, <https://williamsinstitute.law.ucla.edu/>

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For more information and additional resources, visit https://cops.usdoj.gov/labor_trafficking.

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